

For more information, please visit: <http://www.verwey-jonker.nl>

Summary: Local authorities and civil society. The European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, poverty and social exclusion frequently cause persistent problems, which affect about 10% of the population, according to European figures. The fight against poverty and exclusion is mainly a local authorities' responsibility. Current policies are increasingly directed towards breaking dependence and promoting participation and self-reliance. How successful are these policies? How do these policies combine with adequate protection of and service to vulnerable groups? To what degree do local council services and social organizations cooperate towards integrated local antipoverty policies and to what degree are such policies widely supported by people in low-income groups and other citizens? What steps towards such integrated policies have been made and how can these be expanded? *Stedenestafette* (city estafette), a 2010 Dutch initiative to combat poverty and social exclusion, offered an opportunity to bring these questions to the public's attention, to answer them together with all people involved, and to generate elements for a local social agenda for the future.

Stedenestafette was initiated by MOVISIE, Verwey-Jonker Institute, the municipality of Utrecht, Divosa and Sociale Alliantie. No fewer than 23 local authorities joined the initiative: Alkmaar, Almere, Breda, Delft, Den Haag, Eindhoven, Enschede, Hengelo, Leidschendam-Voorburg, Lelystad, Oss, Ridderkerk, Roosendaal, Rotterdam, Sittard-Geleen, Tilburg, Utrecht, Vlaardingen, Waddinxveen, Woerden, Zeist, and Zoetermeer. They passed on the initiative to one another, organized a local event to draw the public's attention to poverty and they gave Verwey-Jonker Institute the opportunity to study local agenda setting and collaboration between public and private actors, including people experiencing poverty. This resulted in 23 *Stedenestafette* reports on local cooperation and governance processes with regard to poverty reduction. Local initiatives became more widely known through this *Stedenestafette*. These local initiatives are elaborated in the 23 reports. The reports focus on strengthening, renewing and improving local cooperation for the sake of low income groups.

This final report provides an overview of the results. Similarities and differences between the local social inclusion policies involved are spelled out, and they are presented with opportunities to learn from one another.

This final report consists of nine chapters and a number of sidebars in which the knowhow about (the cooperation on) combating poverty at the local level is presented. **The first chapter contains**

the introduction, which presents a short overview of earlier research into poverty and combat poverty policies in the Netherlands. **Chapter 2 presents the background of *Stedenestafette***: the Dutch and European contexts are discussed in terms of figures and basic policy principles. A number of national actors of this domain are also introduced: Divosa (directors of local social services), VNG (Association of Netherlands Municipalities), Sociale Alliantie (national civil society organizations -CSO's- for combating poverty) and the G32 (32 medium sized cities) Cities Network.

Chapter 3 reflects on the municipalities that have been participating in *Stedenestafette*. The 23 local authorities of which the policies have been described, about over 5% of all local authorities in the Netherlands include nearly 6% of the entire population. Many local authorities taking part in *Stedenestafette* were relatively large.

We also present the most important general findings concerning the antipoverty policies of the local authorities concerned. **Apart from income support, the local authorities feel that their antipoverty policies should promote social participation. Nearly all local authorities recognise the complexity of poverty and social inclusion issues.** Many local authorities emphasize, at least formally, the national CSO's viewpoint that antipoverty policies can only be implemented if all parties involved cooperate at the local level. This means that the low income groups themselves must also be fully involved.

In this chapter, a number of local authorities are clustered. For instance, the three smallest municipalities (Waddinxveen, Ridderkerk, and Woerden) which have joined *Stedenestafette* are grouped together, as are the three largest ones (The Hague, Rotterdam, and Utrecht). Furthermore, we draw group portraits of the new towns involved (Almere, Lelystad, and Zoetermeer), and the former textile towns (Enschede, Hengelo, and Tilburg).

Chapter 3 is followed by a **sidebar on children and poverty**. Promoting children's participation is a priority for many *Stedenestafette* municipalities. In this respect, the relations between European, nationwide and local policies can be clearly seen. The last few years, the European Commission has given the Children and Poverty theme a major place on the political agendas of the member states. This goes for the Netherlands as well. The Netherlands harbors a worrying number of children growing up in poverty. According to the latest figures published, this involves 382,000 children, over 11% of the 0-18 year olds. These children live in families with incomes of at most 120% of the social minimum income level. Children in single parent families run a greater risk of poverty than children living with both parents. There is a 50% chance for underage children from single parent families to grow up in poverty.

Chapter 4 concentrates on the target groups for local cooperation and the service scope of local authorities taking part in *Stedenestafette*. Attempts to reduce the non-take-up of income support measures such as the provision for exceptional expenses (supplementary minimum income benefit) and exemption from municipal taxes have been a major focus in the fight against poverty and social exclusion for years. In the Netherlands, local authorities generally succeed reasonably well in reaching the actual minimum income benefit claimants. It turns out to be much more difficult to reach other related target groups such as the elderly, immigrant women, young people and young mothers, low income wage earners, the homeless, and the chronically ill and handicapped. For this

reason, many Stedenestafette towns employ teams to help people fill in request forms. The team members, frequently volunteers, help people to apply for municipal services and housing and care allowances.

The relative absence of cooperation at the local authority level with regard to policies for the working poor, the homeless and the chronically ill and handicapped, is worrying. With regard to the homeless, the large cities (Utrecht, Rotterdam, and The Hague) are an exception; for the chronically ill and handicapped, the exception is the city of Enschede.

The recent focus of local authorities on self-reliance and autonomy turns out to have a downside. Low income groups do not always have access to correct information about services and benefits. They are hindered by (from their point of view) incomprehensible local bureaucracy and they are ashamed about their difficult situation. The citizen may be responsible for arranging his or her own life, but the local authority still has a major task in removing impediments and facilitating self-reliance. City officials, and local Civil Society Organisations (CSO's) also indicate the need for a simple and systematic overview - a 'social map' - of municipal organizations involved in fighting poverty and social exclusion. This would be a great help in assisting low income groups to obtain support, and in preventing duplication. Citizens would also be helped by a common approach, where the services implementing the Social Support Act (WMO - social welfare and social care regulation) and the Employment and Assistance Act (WWB - minimum income and activation regulation) - can be contacted through a one-stop-shop.

This chapter is followed by a **sidebar** with information on the working poor. In the Netherlands, among the self-employed, the proportion of working poor has risen to about 12% during the last few years. They are often not eligible for income support. Local authorities' involvement in this group is just beginning. The towns of Delft, Tilburg, and Hengelo form exceptions to this rule.

Chapter 5 focuses on the efforts of local CSO's in the fight against poverty. Professional and volunteer organizations are examined, for instance food and clothing banks, social advisors organizations, housing associations, churches and mosques, educational institutes and health insurance organizations. Altogether, 439 staff members of social organizations in the Netherlands responded to our survey on local cooperation, twice the number of local officials joining in. **Half of these organizations** are subsidized structurally by the local council. CSO's clearly play an important role, and also form essential links between low income groups and policy makers. This is especially true for the promotion of participation. In cases where local authorities focus on income support, they often work together with social organizations to promote participation among low income groups. Housing associations are active and popular partners in this area.

Slightly less than half the respondent organizations indicate that in the future more cooperation with other organizations will be necessary to help low income groups. Many of the organizations expect more local authority steering with regard to poverty reduction, and especially with regard to the necessary cooperation. For the organizations involved, debt relief is a main focus especially the long waiting lists are a gigantic obstacle.

Chapter 6 concerns the cooperation between local CSO's and local authorities: how do the organizations evaluate this cooperation? What is the job division between public and private partners and what aspects could be improved? Some local authorities formalize the cooperation among a large number of parties to fight poverty and social exclusion into a covenant. **Many organizations and officials also set up local conferences on poverty to exchange information on activities and to attune specific action points.**

Both cso's and the local authorities' social workers indicate that so far, the cooperation was often limited to exchanging information and contacts about specific individual cases. Mutual projects are also frequently organized and implemented, but expert knowledge on the problems of poverty and their solutions is generally too infrequently shared. Local CSO's and local officials rarely meet on a day-to-day basis; our enquiry shows they rarely share front offices or other services. The local CSO's we have consulted, generally rate the cooperation with local authorities about 6.7 out of 10 points.

Because of the huge numbers of organizations and groups actively combating poverty and social exclusion, and their diversity, the overall picture is often perceived to be missing, and fragmentation is seen as a real danger. Everyone agrees that many hands are needed to alleviate poverty and social exclusion, but the best way to coordinate these efforts is not always clear. What is needed is a more structural form of cooperation between local authorities and CSO's , but also the definition of realistic targets and knowledge of the outcomes and impact of interventions and initiatives to assist low income groups. An evaluation of the yields of this cooperation between local authorities and CSO's is definitely called for. This would help clarifying the division of the tasks between public and private actors - something all organizations involved desire. About half of the organizations involved, and less than half of the local officials, desire to see more cooperation in the future.

In chapter 7, the focus shifts to cooperation within local government, where integrated action has been a policy objective for years, but where its implementation is often hampered. Most local authorities still entrust the formulation and execution of antipoverty policies to the departments dealing also with the implementation of social welfare and minimum income regulations and measures. The local officials evaluate the cooperation between different council departments favorably (6,8 out of 10 points), but offer many suggestions for improvement. Generally, they perceive the need for decompartmentalisation and steering of integrated policies, and note that this is often not a run race. This is the reason, for instance, the town of Tilburg has commissioned an antipoverty policies programme manager.

In nearly all local Stedenestafette reports, the final advisory chapter includes a recommendation to start, strengthen or improve the cooperation between council departments. This is the only way of responding to the demand for integrated policies. This will also help local authorities implementing their steering role regarding a chain approach in poverty reduction. A local authority speaking with one voice, becomes a credible manager.

Poverty reduction could credibly be shaped along the interface between the Social Support Act (WMO - social care and participation) and the Employment and Assistance Act (WWB - work and income). Obviously, this should be a combination of policies for low income groups and policies for

youth and other vulnerable citizens in the fields of quality of life, care and social support, informal care and volunteering.

The *Stedenestafette* towns count a number of forerunners in this area. Basically, there are three ways to link the Social Support Act domain to antipoverty policies: through projects, through the linking of services within the local administration, or through municipal aldermans' portfolios. All three are tested in the city of Eindhoven. The Hague and Eindhoven combine a wide range of services, and Breda, Zeist, and Roosendaal created links at project level.

Chapter 7 is followed by a **sidebar on participation through culture and sport**. In all *Stedenestafette* towns, inhabitants with low incomes are eligible to take part in social, cultural and sporting activities at very low cost or for free. These services are often specifically directed to the children of low income groups. **Major partners for the local authorities in this area are two national foundations** (the Leergeld foundation and Jeugdsportfonds).

In chapter 8, we return to the individual local authorities. **For each municipality, we list the best 'export products'** in the area of local antipoverty measures or measures against social exclusion. We also note what practices, initiatives or policies each local authority would be advised to import. This chapter enables Dutch local authorities to learn from each other's best practices.

Chapter 9 forms the conclusion, centering on the setting of a local social agenda for the future. Both the local authorities and the local CSO's in the *Stedenestafette* towns do their utmost to tackle poverty and social exclusion in their municipality. Together, they fight poverty, but the government - governance shift is very complicated. The parties involved expect very much from one another. In order to promote the communication regarding these expectations, our survey identified the priorities for the near future. This results in five starting points for stronger local antipoverty policies: with special care for children's possibilities, with attention for the local authority's steering of the antipoverty chain approach, combining prevention policies and target group policies, linking antipoverty policies to Social Support Act services and a more clear appreciation of the local level. The local level is crucial in fighting poverty and social exclusion. In the social agenda setting, all people involved in *Stedenestafette* make an appeal to continue providing local authorities and local CSO's with the means to needed to fully play this role.

The European year for combating poverty and social exclusion has been vital in creating the momentum for mobilizing the support of partners to our *Stedenestafette*. The participating cities and municipalities showed their commitment with the three pillars of Active Inclusion: a decent income, labour market and social participation, delivery of adequate services. But they also share the overarching principle of stakeholder involvement being the best leverage for effective policy making.